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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews writing assessment--what it means and how it works--at a selected number of colleges and universities in the United States. The digest discusses outcomes assessment, placement testing, placement and the writing process, and end-of-course evaluation. The digest concludes with a brief reminder for college-bound students of what writing specialists look for in determining writing skill: fluency or the amount written; quality and quantity of detail; complexity of ideas; organization; and correctness. (RS)

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ERIC Digest

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Writing Assessment at the College Level

by Alice G. Brand

In high school, multiple-choice, short answer tests are often used as writing exams. For several years now, however, writing specialists have agreed that, when it comes to testing, nothing gets at writing better than writing itself. This testing calls for evaluating writing samples. First-draft writing to a set topic is closer to the real writing—the kind students are apt to do in college, in graduate school, or on the job—than any multiple-choice question could possibly be. Moreover, a fairly dependable picture of a student's writing skills can be drawn from writing completed in anywhere from 20 (or 30) minutes (like the SAT) to two hours. On the idea of "forewarned is forearmed," this digest reviews writing assessment—what it means and how it works—at a selected number of colleges and universities in the United States.

Outcomes Assessment

Outcomes Assessment means measuring an individual's writing ability after writing has been studied formally. At the college level such measures of writing skill serve important functions: admission, placement, course equivalency, junior status, exit from courses, or barriers to graduation. What this means is that much of what happens academically to a student from admission to graduation can actually depend on writing performance.

An effective test will not only be able to certify to a student's competency as a freshman writer, it can also certify to writing ability as a transfer student or a rising junior—a second semester sophomore who has completed between 45 and 54 college credits and is entering the junior year and declaring a major. Once into a major these writing tests can confirm skill in that major, and/or as a graduating senior. They may even determine whether or not a student graduates.

Placement Testing

Placement testing in writing is the first form of outcomes assessment colleges undertake when a student arrives on campus. Because it tells the college how well the student has learned to write in high school, it helps identify the appropriate college writing course for him or her. Placement testing also allows for more refined placement once the freshman writing class begins.

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For example, in large systems like City University of New York, a freshman writing assessment may consist simply of a 50-minute placement test requiring students to respond to one of several topics. The University of Georgia uses the single essay for placement at three skills levels, as do technical institutes such as the New Jersey Institute of Technology and California Polytechnic Institute. Students entering Cal Poly take a two-part examination consisting of an objective test as well as a placement essay.

UCLA's entry level exam includes a reading passage followed by a choice of two questions, one based closely on the text and the other on personal experience. SUNY (State University of New York) Geneseo's testing program, on the other hand, works exclusively with less-prepared students. Administered by a Language Skills Center, placement consists of a one-hour essay which screens non-native speakers of English for an ESL course or for the one semester required writing process course.

Placement at many community colleges is similar, collecting a writing sample for placement into a course for less-prepared students or a standard one or two course sequence. Along with an exam, colleges often factor into a placement decision the student's high school average and/or the SAT verbal score and the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE). Such a system is currently in place at several SUNY schools, including SUNY Brockport (Brand, 1992).

Placement and the Writing Process

Writing a single essay seems easy enough. But what students may not be aware of is that more and more colleges are looking for not only what is written but how it is written. Over the last two decades interest in the written product has widened to the writing process. Writing specialists believe that better work is more likely to be produced when the student is engaged in an effective process. This means that a student's writing develops over time: time to draft ideas, receive feedback, revise repeatedly—even scrapping parts of a piece and rewriting others—then editing, and proofreading.

And this in turn has meant a shift in college testing. If a student has been taught a writing process approach—now standard in many high school English programs—a timed, single-session essay test alone is not a valid method for evaluating writing performance. The problem is simply that what is tested is not what is presumably taught.

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The single writing sample has come under attack because it captures only the first draft, the start of the writing process. Test essays should reflect the conditions under which a student has been instructed. This means first drafts or prewriting, multiple revision, and incubation or rest time—at least in classes that emphasize process (Sanders and Littlefield, 1975).

How well a student engages in the writing process can be approximated by (1) building revision into the single essay exam, or (2) evaluating the work by portfolio. Let's take the first option: the single placement essay.

When a student writes a placement essay as a freshman, he or she may find some writing process activities incorporated into the exam situation. Some colleges announce their topic (for example, the environment) to freshmen several weeks in advance and invite them to choose the environmental problem and its impact on the environment and then propose a solution. They may draw on several patterns of development (e.g., description, narration, analysis) to make their point. And they are given time to prepare, that is, prewrite. Students may be given several topics ahead of time.

The University of Missouri-St. Louis simulates the revision process under test conditions by allowing less able writers to discuss a topic and prewrite on the first day of the exam. The essays are then collected and returned to them the next day in order to "complete" the written product.

Placement at SUNY Stony Brook is more complicated because it attempts to compress the writing process into freshman orientation. During summer orientation Stony Brook conducts a "regular" English composition class of two hours for all incoming freshmen. Instead of merely completing the usual impromptu essay, students participate in free writing, discussion, draft writing, and peer response groups. Students also write about how they feel about this experience, thus reflecting on the writing process itself. The final draft is completed and used for placement in the appropriate course.

End-of-Course Evaluation

At the other end of the college composition course the work must be evaluated. Students are certainly familiar with a final essay exam. And to some extent that is still happening at college. How a student wrote at the beginning of a semester can be compared with how well he or she writes after a course of study in writing.

The principal goals of an outcomes assessment in writing is to answer these two questions: Did the writing course actually help the student write better? If it did, can that growth be measured? The attempt to measure the gains a student made from a particular course may be called value-added assessment (White, 1990). Improved scores between pre- and post-tests are expected to show the value a course has had for the student. If a writing course has brought about gains, then those gains should be observable, appearing in behaviors that can be measured. Although many improvements in an individual's writing process take place in the mind and are therefore not observable, what changes are inferred from them become the value added to the individual from the course (White, 1990).

At Chicago State University students take the English Qualifying Essay Exam, which follows a two-course sequence. Despite highly individualized classes, the University of Southern California uses a two-hour uniform final exam consisting of a single question based on a small group of readings. Students receive the topic in advance but not the question, and can discuss the topic with their instructors and fellow students. SUNY Brockport does not test skills outcomes as such but provides a two-part final exam as an option for instructors. Some colleges provide a final or exit exam only for students writing below their expected level.

But an increasingly popular option for judging a student's writing performance that takes into account the writing process is the portfolio. In portfolio assessment several representative pieces written over a given course of study are evaluated. Depending on how the requirements are designed, the portfolio generally brings together several pieces of writing collected at intervals over the semester. The portfolio may even include early drafts. The great advantage of the portfolio approach is that it emphasizes writing that occurs over time—the process—not simply the product.

While placement at SUNY Stony Brook is based on a single essay and conducted during freshman orientation, it operates one of the most venerable portfolio programs in the country, having replaced the final exam with the portfolio as an outcome measure in freshman composition a decade ago. Many schools have adapted Stony Brook's model for their own needs, including Miami University of Ohio which now even accepts portfolios with admission. (For the use of portfolios in elementary and secondary schools, see Farr, 1991).

A Brief Reminder

For college-bound students, here is a "quick-and-dirty" list of what writing specialists look for to determine writing skill:

- fluency or the amount written
- quality and quantity of detail
- complexity of ideas
- organization
- correctness

Writing is considered a good indication of how well a person thinks. For most people, there is no short cut to effective thinking on paper. It is the person, the words, and the labor between both.

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